

## I, Victor Aguilar, Resign in Protest from Durham because of their Unsafe Practices

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Since the incident in Chattanooga, Durham has come under intense scrutiny and pressure to institute company-wide policy changes. Within minutes of this incident, the chatter among the drivers made it clear what direction they want these changes to go. On the basis of no evidence beyond the news report of Johnthony Walker's age, 24, the middle-aged to elderly drivers all insisted that young drivers are too shy about screaming at kids; an older driver would have "laid down the law" and "shown those kids who is boss." They believe that more screaming would have prevented the kids from distracting the driver, which – in their view – is what caused him to innocently bump into a tree. Oops! Darned kids!

Johnthony Walker is not an anomaly; he is the *product* of Durham bus driver training. Here in Casa Grande, Durham recently won a contract previously held by Beeline. It is generally assumed that Durham's commitment to safety – manifested in using the word "safety" in every sentence – is what won them the contract. No. It was Beeline's to lose, not Durham's to win. Beeline was forced out by a combination of violence against a particularly hated driver and non-violent protests against the company as a whole. Having done this once, the parents can do it again. If Durham does not change the policies that made Beeline so hated, then they too will be the subject of both violent and non-violent protest from the parents. Promoting the old manager's Mini-Me to be the new manager was a step in the wrong direction.

First let us consider the violent incident that was the catalyst for Beeline's ignoble retreat. They had a driver named Al whom his supervisor, Rebecca Silva, held up as a role model for the rest of the drivers and who was given special privileges for his exemplary student management skills. He could be heard on the radio every day calling for security to remove some of his students for behavior issues even before leaving the school. It was common for him to turn around and demand that security meet him back at the school to remove some more. He turned in referrals (disciplinary forms) in batches, often as many as ten in a single day. Nobody ever permanently lost their bus privileges because the assistant principal had lost patience with Al. They were not pleased to find kids sleeping on the football field after being ejected from Al's bus. Also, most of those ejections were for cursing and, since the Route #5 kids were never heard cursing elsewhere, it was understood that Al provoked them until they let out with a bad word. This all came to an end when a father got on the bus and challenged Al to a fist fight. In spite of having the law on his side, Al declined to fight and got on the radio and announced his resignation. It turns out that Al was a big tough guy when it came to pushing boys around but, when it came time to fight a grown man, he ran like a rabbit and left a yellow streak behind him. Silva was heartbroken and boasted – nonsensically – that Al was "just about" to beat that man senseless, a claim that left every driver puzzled.

Besides the fact that we now hear the word "safety" about thirty times per day more often than we used to, nothing has changed. Silva, who is now the manager, still boasts of slamming on the brakes to get the attention of kids who are ignoring her screaming. Durham claims that Walker had gone rogue when doing this; but, it has *always* been Durham policy to slam on the brakes as the next level of discipline when screaming at the kids is not working. The videos of this are a feather in a driver's hat, not a black eye.

At least once a month, though more often for drivers like me who are seen as being too soft on the kids, Silva pulls our videos and watches to see if a student stands up or turns around in their seat or opens a window. If there is no screaming from the driver, he is written up for poor student management. Official Durham policy is two-thirds looking at traffic and one third at the students, though it is only the latter that they care about. I told Silva that students tune out screaming, but she said, if the driver slam on the brakes to “get their attention,” then they cannot tune him out. I do not scream and I never brake as punishment.

The practice of slamming on the brakes is particularly galling to the students. The driver is screaming at one scofflaw who is doing something horrible like turning around to chat with his friend behind him or – *God forbid!* – opening a window. And then, because that one student is ignoring the screaming, they all wind up getting their faces slammed into the seat backs. Students will never be convinced that turning around backwards in their seats to talk to friends or opening a window to call to friends on the sidewalk is wrong; I see no harm in this either. I questioned why open windows are a safety issue and was told a fantastic story about a backpack that was supposedly thrown out of a window and killed someone. That story is a fabrication; if Durham really knows of such an incident, then please do show us the video.

Instead of screaming, as Silva demands, I just told the kids that I am on the verge of getting fired and asked them to help me by staying in their seats. I am well liked and the kids responded positively, though there is still occasional movement back there. One rather antsy boy, who plays a starring role in the surveillance videos, is hyperactive. He knows that his actions might get me fired and he is earnestly trying to stay still, though he will never be 100% motionless. I appreciate that he tries so hard, except for when he forgets.

For me, safety isn't just a buzzword; I really do want these kids to get to school and back home again in one piece. What divides Durham and myself is that I believe safety is the result of my keeping my eyes on the road to watch for hazards like people backing out of driveways, speeding through residential neighborhoods or going around me when I am dropping students. More than once I've averted an accident by seeing a dangerous situation developing on the road ahead of me. In one case, I saved a man's life by skidding my bus to a stop inches short of T-boning him when he ran a stop sign on a side street. Initially, the kids were furious because they thought it was punishment for someone out of their seat, but the kids in the front had seen how close I came to hitting that car's driver-side door and they told the others to calm down. For perhaps the first time in their lives, a school bus had skidded to a stop for good cause. The kids saw me as a hero; Silva threatened to fire me if there was damage – there was not.

Keeping kids safe by watching for traffic hazards is not going to happen if fear for my job forces me to spend all my time looking in the mirror to see if Mr. Ants-in-the-Pants is out of his seat. He is not a safety issue. But ignoring the road so I can stare at the mirror while waiting to slam on my brakes to purposely cause him to fall as he moves from one seat to another IS a safety issue. Also, Silva has repeatedly rebuked me for reporting a driver's unsecured trash can, which is a safety issue because, in an accident, it may fall into the stairwell and jam the door shut. I have reported this dozens of times and Silva verbally berates me for telling her how to do her job. I am now under strict orders to never mention trash cans again.

I lay the following demands on Durham. If Durham refuses to implement them, then I resign in protest.

1. When I started with Beeline in 2014, I was assigned bus #25, that had been manufactured in 1978. After three months, I got bus #64, that was manufactured in 1984. Why such old buses on the same budget that allows Durham to own new 2016 models? The Beeline manager, Emma Torres, purchased eight houses during her tenure. But has anything really changed? The new manager, who in 2014 lived in a trailer with no sewer, now lives in one of those houses.



*I demand that anybody with financial ties to Emma Torres be barred from management at Durham.*

2. In response to the incident in Chattanooga, David Duke is allowing parents and school personnel to call a hotline with reports of bad driver behavior. But slamming on the brakes has always been emblematic of *good* student management skills. The hotline is useless if it does not go to a third party. Using the brakes to throw a child to the floor is abuse, just as much as hitting the child with one's fist.

*I demand that all reports of unnecessary braking be reported to CPS as evidence of child abuse.*

3. Recently, Rebecca Silva pulled my video for an unrelated incident and discovered that I had purchased a six-foot AUX cord and told the students that the seat behind me was the DJ booth where they could play music over the speakers. I told them that I had previously rejected such requests because they had short AUX cords that required standing near the radio, which I said was dangerous if I had to brake. They really liked the AUX cord! One student said, "this is the most power a bus driver has ever given us," another said, "please be our bus driver more often," and another said, "I hope you have a very nice day." This is what caused Silva to explode and bring me to the point of resigning. Such statements by students are an affront to her (really, to Emma Torres') policy of hating on teenagers.

*I demand that all buses be provided with a 6' AUX cord and the front seat be made the DJ booth.*

4. There exists a gambling ring that wagers money on how many ejections (called a 10-86) they can do in a week. For instance, recently, a driver named Diane was heard on the radio gloating, "Well, it's 6:00 p.m. and I'm not opening my door," as she drove away and left ten kids at school. My clock said 5:59 p.m. and these were natives who live on a reservation 20 miles out of town, so I did my route (I was West and she was North, CGUHS activities) and then took the native kids home. The reason they wait until the last moment to get on her bus is because she is always screaming and they hate her. Silva reprimanded me and told me that, if I ever interfered with another driver's disciplinary measures again, I would be fired. More recently, Silva has been doing my route because I am being punished for the AUX cord incident, (3) above, and I heard her boasting on the radio that she had 86'd students at College Park, claiming that they were slow to get on the bus. I later saw those kids walking.

*To prevent gambling, I demand that drivers be prohibited from announcing 10-86 on an open radio.*

5. Emma Torres, the previous manager, recruited former prison guards to be school bus drivers because she assumed that they shared her hatred for teenagers. Guards are easy to recruit because the prisons routinely screw them over on their benefits and vacation days. (Also, Torres and her brothers had been a gang when they were in high school and were later allegedly supplying drugs to the prisons through the guards, which is why some of these former prison guards were looking for a new job.) They are easily identified by their practice of beginning every sentence with the phrase, "Be advised that..." These are bad people. I do not believe that former guards or their spouses should drive buses; high school is not a prison. Seat belts are not the solution – we already have no music, no open windows, no turning sideways or backwards, etc. – and now we are going to strap the kids down? No. Ignored screaming now leads to slamming on the brakes. What if they refuse the straps? Beat them?

*I demand that Durham School Services not hire anyone with a job history of working as a prison guard.*

6. What really galls the students about drivers who scream at them for petty infractions like opening windows or turning sideways in their seats is that the driver never sweeps his bus and does not even have a trash can. They feel that, if he is not doing his own job, then he has no right to scream at them for not doing their jobs. The principal pleasure of these lumpen is sitting in the break room drinking endless cups of free coffee while loudly denouncing the kids as "animals" because they throw their trash on the floor. But, without a trash can, where do they think the kids are going to put their trash? Instead of a trash can, the drivers just 10-86 anybody caught bringing water bottles or snacks onto the bus. Kids do not act like animals unless you treat them like animals. I defy the no-food-or-drink rule every day and sweep the bus after every run. It is very rare for me to find any trash because the kids all like me – I am known as "the cool bus driver" – and they go out of their way not to offend me.

*I demand that all buses have a trash can and that it be secured so it cannot jam the doors shut.*

The bottom line is that Durham has redefined the word "safety" to mean hate for teenagers. In the name of safety, I am now under strict orders not to have any music on my bus. It is not just the AUX cord that I spent \$15 of my own money on, but I am not allowed to turn on the radio either. If this were the plot to a dystopian Young Adult novel, reviewers would think it exaggerated. They would say, "No music? In real life, adults are never so systematically hateful towards teenagers." But they don't know Durham. Turning sideways or backwards in their seat to talk to a friend or opening a window to wave to a friend on the sidewalk is just normal teenage behavior. It is not unsafe and, especially among the hyperactive, it is never going to stop. But drivers that scream their lungs out, write referrals in batches (in spite of the assistant principal having never acted on them) and finally resort to using the brakes to cause students physical injury IS unsafe. The six children in Chattanooga did not die because Johnthony Walker cared too little about safety, they died because he cared too much about "safety," as the word is defined by Durham.

## Safety Concerns That Durham Refuses to Correct After Months of Complaining

The newspaper in the foreground dates the images 25 Jan 2017.

The unsecured trash can is in bus #06. It is typical for drivers to set their trash can near the stairwell like this where it can fall and jam the door shut in an accident. Some drivers keep it behind their seat, but it is still insecure because almost none of the drivers are tall enough to slide the seat back enough to jam their trash can in place. Most do not have a trash can. When another driver stole mine (or threw it away to create an excuse for not sweeping), it was not replaced and I was told not to mention trash cans again.

Every day at 2:30 p.m., 14 buses turn left against the posted sign and, throughout the day, another 60-70 buses and private cars turn left here. We are under direct orders to disobey this traffic sign.





